

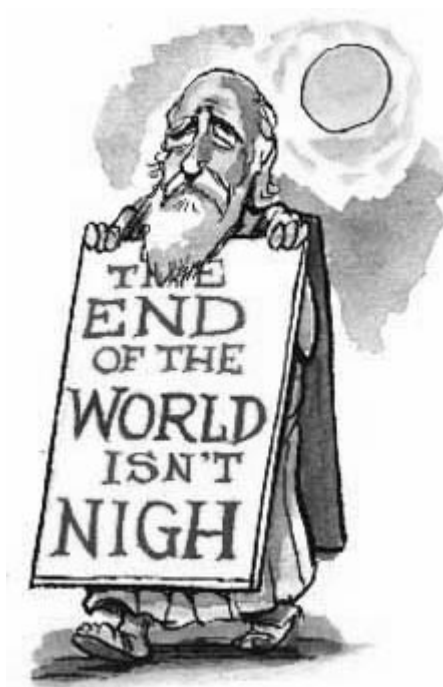
## ENVIRONMENTAL SCARES

## Plenty of gloom

**Forecasters of scarcity and doom are not only invariably wrong, they think that being wrong proves them right**

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IN 1798 Thomas Robert Malthus inaugurated a grand tradition of environmentalism with his best-selling pamphlet on population. Malthus argued with impeccable logic but distinctly peccable premises that since population tended to increase geometrically (1,2,4,8 . . . ) and food supply to increase arithmetically (1,2,3,4 . . . ), the starvation of Great Britain was inevitable and imminent. Almost everybody thought he was right. He was wrong.

In 1865 an influential book by Stanley Jevons argued with equally good logic and equally flawed premises that Britain would run out of coal in a few short years' time. In 1914, the United States Bureau of Mines predicted that American oil reserves would last ten years. In 1939 and again in 1951, the Department of the Interior said American oil

would last 13 years. Wrong, wrong, wrong and wrong.

This article argues that predictions of ecological doom, including recent ones, have such a terrible track record that people should take them with pinches of salt instead of lapping them up with relish. For reasons of their own, pressure groups, journalists and fame-seekers will no doubt continue to peddle ecological catastrophes at an undiminishing speed. These people, oddly, appear to think that having been invariably wrong in the past makes them more likely to be right in the future. The rest of us might do better to recall, when warned of the next doomsday, what ever became of the last one.

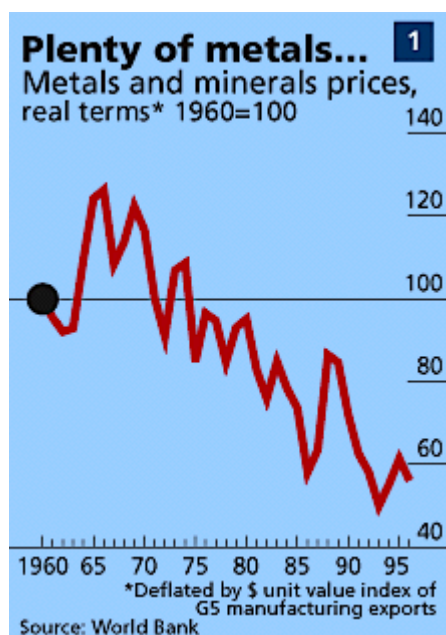
**Empty imaginations**

In 1972 the Club of Rome published a highly influential report called "Limits to

Growth". To many in the environmental movement, that report still stands as a beacon of sense in the foolish world of economics. But were its predictions borne out?

"Limits to Growth" said total global oil reserves amounted to 550 billion barrels. "We could use up all of the proven reserves of oil in the entire world by the end of the next decade," said President Jimmy Carter shortly afterwards. Sure enough, between 1970 and 1990 the world used 600 billion barrels of oil. So, according to the Club of Rome, reserves should have been overdrawn by 50 billion barrels by 1990. In fact, by 1990 unexploited reserves amounted to 900 billion barrels—not counting the tar shales, of which a single deposit in Alberta contains more than 550 billion barrels.

The Club of Rome made similarly wrong predictions about natural gas, silver, tin, uranium, aluminium, copper, lead and zinc. In every case, it said finite reserves of these minerals were approaching exhaustion and prices would rise steeply. In every case except tin, known reserves have actually grown since the Club's report; in some cases they have quadrupled. "Limits to Growth" simply misunderstood the meaning of the word "reserves".



The Club of Rome's mistakes have not tarnished its confidence. It more recently issued to wide acclaim "Beyond the Limits", a book that essentially said: although we were too pessimistic about the future before, we remain equally pessimistic about the future today. But environmentalists have been a little more circumspect since 1990 about predicting the exhaustion of minerals. That year, a much-feted environmentalist called Paul Ehrlich, whose words will prove an inexhaustible (though not infinite: there is a difference) reserve of misprediction for this article, sent an economist called Julian Simon a cheque for \$570.07 in settlement of a wager.

Dr Ehrlich would later claim that he was "goaded into making a bet with Simon on a matter of marginal environmental importance." At the time, though, he said he was keen to "accept Simon's astonishing offer before other greedy people jump in." Dr Ehrlich chose five minerals: tungsten, nickel, copper, chrome and tin. They agreed how much of these metals \$1,000 would buy in 1980, then ten years later recalculated how much that amount of metal would cost (still in 1980 dollars) and Dr Ehrlich agreed to pay the difference if the price fell, Dr Simon if the price rose. Dr Simon won easily; indeed, he would have won even if they had not adjusted the prices for inflation, and he would have won if Dr Ehrlich had chosen virtually any mineral: of 35 minerals, 33 fell in price during the 1980s. Only manganese and zinc were exceptions (see chart 1).

Dr Simon frequently offers to repeat the bet with any prominent doomsayer, but

has not yet found a taker.

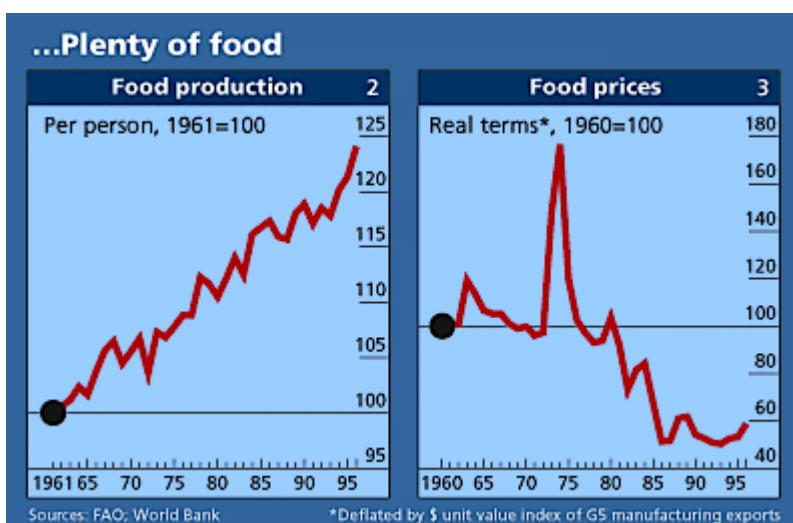
Others have yet to cotton on. The 1983 edition of a British GCSE school textbook said zinc reserves would last ten years and natural gas 30 years. By 1993, the author had wisely removed references to zinc (rather than explain why it had not run out), and he gave natural gas 50 years, which mocked his forecast of ten years earlier. But still not a word about price, the misleading nature of quoted “reserves” or substitutability.

So much for minerals. The record of mispredicted food supplies is even worse. Consider two quotations from Paul Ehrlich’s best-selling books in the 1970s.

Agricultural experts state that a tripling of the food supply of the world will be necessary in the next 30 years or so, if the 6 or 7 billion people who may be alive in the year 2000 are to be adequately fed. Theoretically such an increase might be possible, but it is becoming increasingly clear that it is totally impossible in practice.

The battle to feed humanity is over. In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death.

He was not alone. Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute began predicting in 1973 that population would soon outstrip food production, and he still does so every time there is a temporary increase in wheat prices. In 1994, after 21 years of being wrong, he said: “After 40 years of record food production gains, output per person has reversed with unanticipated abruptness.” Two bumper harvests followed and the price of wheat fell to record lows. Yet Mr Brown’s pessimism remains as impregnable to facts as his views are popular with newspapers.



The facts on world food production are truly startling for those who have heard only the doomsayers’ views. Since 1961, the population of the world has almost doubled, but food production has more than doubled. As a result, food production per head has risen by 20% since 1961 (see chart 2). Nor is this improvement confined to rich countries. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, calories consumed per capita per day are 27% higher in the third world than they were in 1963. Deaths from famine, starvation and malnutrition are fewer than ever before.

“Global 2000” was a report to the president of the United States written in 1980 by a committee of the great and the good. It was so influential that it caused one

CNN producer to “switch from being an objective journalist to an advocate” of environmental doom. “Global 2000” predicted that population would increase faster than world food production, so that food prices would rise by between 35% and 115% by 2000. So far the world food commodity index has fallen by 50% (see chart 3 above). With two years to go, prices may yet quintuple to prove “Global 2000” right. Want to bet?

Perhaps the reader thinks the tone of this article a little unforgiving. These predictions may have been spectacularly wrong, but they were well-meant. But in that case, those quoted would readily admit their error, which they do not. It was not impossible to be right at the time. There were people who in 1970 predicted abundant food, who in 1975 predicted cheap oil, who in 1980 predicted cheaper and more abundant minerals. Today those people—among them Norman Macrae of this newspaper, Julian Simon, Aaron Wildavsky—are ignored by the press and vilified by the environmental movement. For being right, they are called “right-wing”. The truth can be a bitter medicine to swallow.

### Hot headed

Meanwhile, environmental attention switched from resources to pollution. Cancer-causing chemicals were suddenly said to be everywhere: in water, in food, in packaging. Last summer Edward Goldsmith blamed the death of his brother, Sir James, on chemicals: all cancer is caused by chemicals, he claimed, and cancer rates are rising. Not so. The rate of mortality from cancers not related to smoking for those between 35 and 69 is actually falling steadily—by 15% since 1950. Organically grown broccoli and coffee are full of natural substances that are just as carcinogenic as man-made chemicals at high doses and just as safe at low doses.

In the early 1980s acid rain became the favourite cause of doom. Lurid reports appeared of widespread forest decline in Germany, where half the trees were said to be in trouble. By 1986, the United Nations reported that 23% of all trees in Europe were moderately or severely damaged by acid rain. What happened? They recovered. The biomass stock of European forests actually increased during the 1980s. The damage all but disappeared. Forests did not decline: they thrived.

A similar gap between perception and reality occurred in the United States. Greens fell over each other to declare the forests of North America acidified and dying. “There is no evidence of a general or unusual decline of forests in the United States or Canada due to acid rain,” concluded a ten-year, \$700m official study. When asked if he had been pressured to be optimistic, one of the authors said the reverse was true. “Yes, there were political pressures . . . Acid rain had to be an environmental catastrophe, no matter what the facts revealed.”

Today the mother of all environmental scares is global warming. Here the jury is still out, though not according to President Clinton. But before you rush to join the consensus he has declared, compare two quotations. The first comes from *Newsweek* in 1975: “Meteorologists disagree about the cause and extent of the cooling trend . . . But they are *almost unanimous* in the view that the trend will reduce agricultural productivity for the rest of the century.” The second comes from Vice-President Al Gore in 1992: “Scientists concluded—*almost unanimously*—that global warming is real and the time to act is now.” (The italics are ours.)

There are ample other causes for alarmism for the dedicated pessimist as the century's end nears. The extinction of elephants, the threat of mad-cow disease, outbreaks of the Ebola virus, and chemicals that mimic sex hormones are all fashionable. These come in a different category from the scares cited above. The trend in each is undoubtedly not benign, but it is exaggerated.

In 1984 the United Nations asserted that the desert was swallowing 21m hectares of land every year. That claim has been comprehensively demolished. There has been and is no net advance of the desert at all. In 1992 Mr Gore asserted that 20% of the Amazon had been deforested and that deforestation continued at the rate of 80m hectares a year. The true figures are now agreed to be 9% and 21m hectares a year gross at its peak in the 1980s, falling to about 10m hectares a year now.

Just one environmental scare in the past 30 years bears out the most alarmist predictions made at the time: the effect of DDT (a pesticide) on birds of prey, otters and some other predatory animals. Every other environmental scare has been either wrong or badly exaggerated. Will you believe the next one?

Environmental scare stories now follow such a predictable line that we can chart their course. Year 1 is the year of the scientist, who discovers some potential threat. Year 2 is the year of the journalist, who oversimplifies and exaggerates it. Only now, in year 3, do the environmentalists join the bandwagon (almost no green scare has been started by greens). They polarise the issue. Either you agree that the world is about to come to an end and are fired by righteous indignation, or you are a paid lackey of big business.

Year 4 is the year of the bureaucrat. A conference is mooted, keeping public officials well supplied with club-class tickets and limelight. This diverts the argument from science to regulation. A totemic "target" is the key feature: 30% reductions in sulphur emissions; stabilisation of greenhouse gases at 1990 levels; 140,000 ritually slaughtered healthy British cows.

Year 5 is the time to pick a villain and gang up on him. It is usually America (global warming) or Britain (acid rain), but Russia (CFCs and ozone) or Brazil (deforestation) have had their day. Year 6 is the time for the sceptic who says the scare is exaggerated. This drives greens into paroxysms of pious rage. "How dare you give space to fringe views?" cry these once-fringe people to newspaper editors. But by now the scientist who first gave the warning is often embarrassingly to be found among the sceptics. Roger Revelle, nickname "Dr Greenhouse", who fired Al Gore with global warming evangelism, wrote just before his death in 1991: "The scientific basis for greenhouse warming is too uncertain to justify drastic action at this time."

Year 7 is the year of the quiet climbdown. Without fanfare, the official consensus estimate of the size of the problem is shrunk. Thus, when nobody was looking, the population "explosion" became an asymptotic rise to a maximum of just 15 billion; this was then downgraded to 12 billion, then less than 10 billion. That means population will never double again. Greenhouse warming was originally going to be "uncontrolled". Then it was going to be 2.5-4 degrees in a century. Then it became 1.5-3 degrees (according to the United Nations). In two years, elephants went from imminent danger of extinction to badly in need of contraception (the facts did not change, the reporting did).

## **Doom kills**

Is it not a good thing to exaggerate the potential ecological problems the world faces rather than underplay them? Not necessarily. A new book edited by Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns at the University of Sussex ("The Lie of the Land", published by James Currey/Heinemann) documents just how damaging the myth of deforestation and population pressure has been in parts of the Sahel.

Westerners have forced inappropriate measures on puzzled local inhabitants in order to meet activists' preconceived notions of environmental change. The myth that oil and gas will imminently run out, together with worries about the greenhouse effect, is responsible for the despoliation of wild landscapes in Wales and Denmark by ugly, subsidised and therefore ultimately job-destroying wind farms. School textbooks are counsels of despair and guilt (see "Environmental Education", published by the Institute of Economic Affairs), which offer no hope of winning the war against famine, disease and pollution, thereby inducing fatalism rather than determination.

Above all, the exaggeration of the population explosion leads to a form of misanthropy that comes dangerously close to fascism. The aforementioned Dr Ehrlich is an unashamed believer in the need for coerced family planning. His fellow eco-guru, Garrett Hardin, has said that "freedom to breed is intolerable". If you think population is "out of control" you might be tempted to agree to such drastic curtailments of liberty. But if you know that the graph is flattening, you might take a more tolerant view of your fellow human beings.

You can be in favour of the environment without being a pessimist. There ought to be room in the environmental movement for those who think that technology and economic freedom will make the world cleaner and will also take the pressure off endangered species. But at the moment such optimists are distinctly unwelcome among environmentalists. Dr Ehrlich likes to call economic growth the creed of the cancer cell. He is not alone. Sir Crispin Tickell calls economics "not so much dismal as half-witted".

Environmentalists are quick to accuse their opponents in business of having vested interests. But their own incomes, their advancement, their fame and their very existence can depend on supporting the most alarming versions of every environmental scare. "The whole aim of practical politics", said H.L. Mencken, "is to keep the populace alarmed—and hence clamorous to be led to safety—by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary." Mencken's forecast, at least, appears to have been correct.

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## LINKS

Substantial extracts from Malthus's first [Essay on Population](#) are available from Fordham University. An abstract of the Club of Rome's report [Limits to Growth](#) (1972) is on the club's website. Many articles and books by [Julian Simon](#) are available online. And the [Worldwatch Institute's](#) site includes excerpts from the institute's magazine.

The UN's [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) has a large online statistical database. The Millennium Institute offers a series of gloomy [State of The World Indicators](#) ("years until one third of species are lost", "years until half of crude oil is gone", etc) and also its own update of the [Global 2000 Report](#).

Good sources of information for the cool-headed about resources and the environment are available from, among others, the [Science and Environmental Policy Project](#), the

Advancement of Sound Science Coalition, and at the Global Warming Information Page of the Cooler Heads Coalition.

A novel and distinctly uncool approach to environmental matters is taken by the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (“Phasing out the human race by voluntarily ceasing to breed will allow Earth’s biosphere to return to good health. Crowded conditions and resource shortages will improve as we become less dense.”).

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